By Paul E. Kandarian Photograph by Rob Pike

No Excuses

Memo to kids who bunk school: you could wind up in truancy court, and this judge has heard it all.

Jeremiah S. Jeremiah Jr. doesn't miss a single trick. He knows them all.

"Where do you live, son?" he asks the skinny thirteen-year-old boy before him in a tiny, makeshift courtroom at Bain Junior High School in Cranston where truancy court is being held this day.

The kid mumbles his address. Jeremiah leans back in his chair, crosses his arms over his ample middle and lets out a "Hmm…."

Is that at the corner of such-and-such, he asks? The kid mumbles yes. You live in that yellow triple-decker, the judge continues? The kid's eyes widen, and you can almost hear him thinking, "Damn, he knows where I live!"

Indeed he does. Cranston native Jeremiah, now chief judge of the Rhode Island Family Court, knows the city, knows the state and most important knows kids. Not much gets by this guy.

Begun in 1999 with a $900,000 federal grant, truancy court is now in ten Rhode Island towns. A courtroom is set up on a rotating basis in a school in each community, complete with raised platform to give the intentional air of having the authoritative upper hand. The goal is to have an immediate effect on truancy and school problems students might be having. Kids from that town's schools appear before the judge, sometimes dozens at a time. And it works. Since court began, the school attendance rate for truant children brought to court has risen from 49 to 89 percent, says Ron Pagliarini, administrator of truancy court.

"It's an immediate response to the problem," he says. "If kids go downtown [before a judge in the regular courtroom], it can take thirty to forty-five days to process, and it might be three to five months before a judge even sees the student. With this, if we're at one school on a Friday and a kid misses a day of school the next week, we know about it by that next Friday. This holds the school, parents and the court accountable. It holds everyone's feet to the fire."

Jeremiah is an imposing figure in his courtroom, which this day at Bain Junior High School is stuffed into a twelve-by-twenty-foot room. He's blessed with a stern yet avuncular air, looking a little like Tom Bosley, patriarch of the old "Happy Days" TV show. Still, he is not to be messed with, as he molds his courtroom countenance to the personality of each child. If they're compliant, he softens and praises, and will often have them say, "I am somebody." If a kid has an attitude, however, woe to that child.

"I said speak up!" he bellows at one particularly stubborn boy. The kid does.

Above all, he's positive. A tall, skinny boy has a problem with female authority. That prompts Jeremiah to say "that's the wrong thing to be when you're before a judge with three daughters." He's an excuse buster. The kid has a million reasons why he's not in school, and Jeremiah shoots them down one by one, firmly.

"You have a brain in your head, right?" he asks pointedly. "Then why are you giving us and yourself such a hard time?"

As with all kids, he leans on this one's potential button: "You need to know you are somebody. You need to know you are some-

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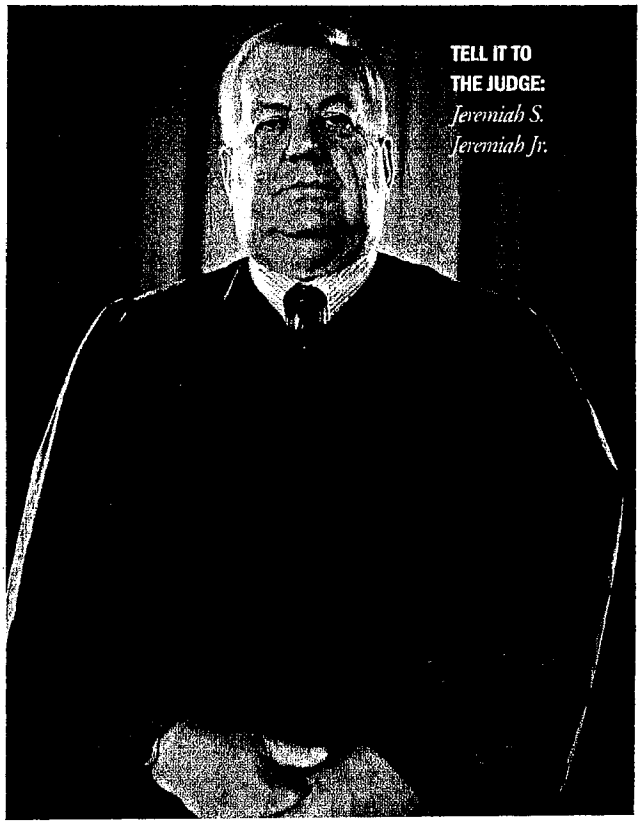

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body to everyone in this room."

This isn't cut-and-dried justice, nothing is simple as a kid stealing a car and getting a term at the Rhode Island Training School. This is an often sad mish-mash of social ills: kids from broken homes, kids living in homes with drugs, booze, domestic violence, root causes all of truancy. But with education there is hope, Jeremiah believes, as he enforces that theory, sometimes gruffly.

"You think this is funny?" he asks one thirteen-year-old girl with a smirk. Smirk gone. The girl had been on school grounds during a detention when she didn't have it. But after Jeremiah is done, she has detention, three times a week. Turns out she wasn't doing her homework, either. "Now you can do your homework there," he says.

This is Jeremiah's hard side. He also orders the girl to write a 500-word essay on the colonization of America and have it not only in her teacher's hands in a week, but on his desk as well. The girl walks out with the glimmer of tears in her eyes.

Sam Johnson is the court officer here, a fierce-looking man with shaved head, handcuffs and a gun. At one point, a defiant fourteen-year-old comes in with his books, one of which is adorned with a Mickey Mouse sticker. It's a reminder of youthful innocence despite his arrogant veneer. The judge orders Johnson to cuff the boy and take him to the hallway for a chat. The boy's father thanks Jeremiah and requests that his son be given a tour of the training school. Jeremiah gladly complies.

One by one they file in, and occasionally Jeremiah threatens jail time for the parents. By law they can be fined or even imprisoned if their kids are truant, but it is something he hasn't done yet. This court is not punitive, he says. They're here to help. Still, it doesn't hurt to invoke the fear factor when necessary. Truancy court is not about innocence lost but rather innocence on the edge. A kid can teeter from one side to the other, but as long as Jeremiah rules, he'll use his big legal hand to push the kid in the right direction.

Another case comes before him, a thirteen-year-old girl who is not only truant, but also charged with shoplifting, allegedly for her mother. The judge shakes his head and asks no one in particular, "Are we doing any good here?"

He already knows the answer to that. He doesn't miss a trick. ■

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